



Faculty of Design

2014

## Kapsula

Morgan-Feir, Caoimhe, Terziyska, Yoli, LeBlanc, Lindsay, Pearl, Zach, Gallpen, Britt, Cooley, Alison, Mabey, Jacqueline, Bacal, Edward, Henry, Joseph, Weldon, Aaron, Williamson, Matthew and Cherniack, Jennifer

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### Suggested citation:

Morgan-Feir, Caoimhe, Terziyska, Yoli, LeBlanc, Lindsay, Pearl, Zach, Gallpen, Britt, Cooley, Alison, Mabey, Jacqueline, Bacal, Edward, Henry, Joseph, Weldon, Aaron, Williamson, Matthew and Cherniack, Jennifer (2014) Kapsula. Fail Again, Fake Better . KAPSULA PRESS, Toronto, Canada. Available at <https://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/2116/>

On the Cover IRIS HÄUSSLER Untitled image Taken in the yard of the Academy of Fine Art, Munich, Germany, Winter 1985. Photographer unknown.

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# FAIL AGAIN, FAKE BETTER

SELECTIONS FROM  
THE 13TH ANNUAL YORK UNIVERSITY  
ART HISTORY GRADUATE STUDENT SYMPOSIUM



# KAPSULA

## SPECIAL ISSUE

### SELECTIONS FROM

#### THE 13<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL YORK UNIVERSITY

# ART HISTORY

### GRADUATE STUDENT SYMPOSIUM

## Production

Editor in Chief /

Subscriptions & Development /

Marketing & Communications /

Design /

This issue was produced in collaboration with the Art History Graduate Student Association (AHGSA) at York University in Toronto, Canada. The selected papers and projects were originally presented as a symposium, *Fail Again, Fake Better*, on the 14<sup>th</sup> of March, 2014 at the Joan & Martin Goldfarb Centre for Fine Arts in Toronto.

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KAPSULA Magazine is a serial publication of KAPSULA Press:

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## On the Cover

IRIS HÄUSSLER

Untitled image

Taken in the yard of the Academy of Fine Art, Munich, Germany, Winter 1985. Photographer unknown.



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# CONTENTS



**THROW YOUR  
NOTIONS  
IN THE OCEANS**



# Prologue

# Roads to failure

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The queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art and for being.

- J. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*

All of old.  
Nothing else ever.  
Ever tried. Ever failed.  
No matter. Try again.  
Fail again. Fail better.

- Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho*

Of late, failure has enjoyed some amount of scholarly fame and artistic attention, however, its total minutes of fame is yet-to-be determined. A sense of failure pervades this era, which makes it unsurprising that so many contemporary artists embrace methodologies of failing. Who could overlook the urgent conversations about the failures of late capitalism and an increasingly precarious future? Or the enduring failures of colonialism that inflict widespread disregard for human life? Or the basic failures of humankind to care for the environment? And the abuses of this stewardship that see the arctic melting, the continents flooding and imminent large-scale ecological destruction? Yet, while failure undoubtedly abounds, it can also be the infrastructure upon which new critical methods are devised. In this regard, we call to 'fail better.'

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Upon first consideration, the connections between the respective ideas of faking and failure seem tenuous. Admittedly, the two were chosen as a compromise to appease disparate and conflicting opinions among the organizers of the symposium, *Fail Again, Fake Better*, hosted by the York University Art History Graduate Students Association (AHGSA). Surprising and critical links between the themes of faking and failing emerged from this dissension, however, and, as many of the presenters and projects proposed, faking shares some fundamental ideological premises with the notion of failing. Most notably, both surmount certain restrictions imposed by the exclusive structures of normativity. Failing can provide a productive alternative to such structures, while 'faking it' grants entry through a back door.

A compelling nexus of failing and faking was addressed by Iris Häussler in her featured artist talk, herein described by Britt Gallpen. Häussler's practice, which finds purchase in her use of fictional, or in our parlance fake, personas, seemed befitting of our symposium theme, however, her unexpected embrace and celebration of the productive aspects of failure in her artistic infancy opened up a surprising space where failure mingled with the act of faking it, ostensibly rendering the discrete notions as symbiotic. Alison Cooley describes a similar relationship that exists in Ryan Ferko's project, *Banff Coal Endowment Society*, wherein the methodology of faking is underscored by unexpected failure. The two become intertwined and implicated in the project's capacity to critique large-scale, top-down development projects that endanger designated heritage sites.

Jacqueline Mabey's wholesale embrace of failure, as ex-

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plored in part through Herman Melville's short story *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*, serves to propose an anti-capitalist strategy that counters the ubiquitous "too big to fail" ethos that plagues contemporary modes of commerce and, more generally, *being*. Mabey calls for new inclusive spaces characterized by a shared failure that undermines the authority of success narratives and celebrates art that "visualizes the deficiencies of the system, that refuses to reproduce it, [and] that dumbfounds expectation."

Edward Bacal takes up the complex relationship between art, politics, history and collective memory. His text explores art's ability to re-populate the collective imagination with marginalized histories as a method to counter the hegemonic state-endorsed historicism in post-industrial Britain through Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave*. Conversely, Joseph Henry questions art's ability to enact political mobilization, particularly when art is seeking to create ameliorative representations of violently radical politics. His in-depth inquiry considers Joseph Beuys' project at documenta V, which involved mentions of the German terrorist group RAF, and contemporary references to this project.

On a more local level, Aaron Weldon explores his anecdotal experience of staging an inadvertent hoax. In trying to help a friend make ends meet in Cuba, Weldon sold his paintings to tourists in Havana, who were under the erroneous assumption that local artists produced the paintings. The respective economies of tourism and authenticity become entwined in Weldon's project, exposing the high stakes that emerge when consumption is compounded by expectations of cultural legitimacy.

In addition to the insightful scholarly contributions within this issue, Jennifer Cherniack and Matthew Williamson present their compelling *ad hoc* art project, *Art Condescensions*. This series of posters considers the ways in which 'art speak' fails as a communicative tool. Their fake slogans point to the absurdity of a "brain-dead art ideology," and

call for a re-consideration of descriptive systems that can serve to exclude rather than convey. The posters are featured throughout the issue and provide a visual continuity among the essays and projects presented here.

Ultimately, every conclusion is a failure. Words peter out, and no grand gesture can ever offer an appropriately nuanced summary. But, as these texts and projects suggest, such failure should be grasped with enthusiasm, and mobilized against the very systems of success that enable failure's existence. Mabey describes the roads to failure as infinite—like its countless pathways, the projects within this special issue hardly offer a consensus regarding failure. In this regard, this is perhaps a fake conclusion: one that can only pretend to draw some sort of cohesive sense from the otherwise disparate and conflicting considerations that follow. This issue only starts a conversation regarding the productive potential of the twin phenomena of faking and failing; let's hope that they each occupy critical attention for longer than their pre-allocated 15 minutes, becoming instead the stuff necessary to go forward.

The symposium and this subsequent publication would not have been possible without the help of so many; I would like to thank my fellow chair and friend John Geoghegan for his help in planning the conference and the members of AHGSA who worked tirelessly to ensure that the event was, perhaps ironically, a success. I would also like to thank all of the symposium presenters and moderators, and those who contributed to this issue. York University, Katzman Contemporary and PM Gallery all generously contributed to the symposium as well. Lastly, I would like to thank the KAPSULA team, who have been wonderful collaborators and without whom this issue would, of course, not have been possible. Thank you all.

*Natasha Chaykowski*  
Symposium Co-Chair

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THE  
TENSION  
BETWEEN  
WHATEVER  
AND

WHATEVER



# RECKLESS EXPERIMENTATIONS

BRITT GALLPEN

It seems a natural fit, obvious even, to include artist Iris Häussler when discussing the role of fakes, hoaxes and/or deceptions in contemporary art practice. Häussler, who is perhaps best known for her 2008 project *He Named Her Amber* curated by David Moos for the Art Gallery of Ontario's reopening, constructs elaborately detailed and immersive narrative installations around fictitious personae. It was surprising to me, then, how often she swung to a preoccupation of failure's figuration in her development as an artist, both in the artist talk she gave in conjunction with our symposium and in my subsequent conversation with her.

A skilled manipulator of mood and drama, Häussler began her artist talk via proxy, spontaneously commandeering one of the organizers to amend the introductory biography with something she written herself. It went like this:

*Iris was born in the sixties in Southern Germany as the 3rd child of Sigrid and Otto Häussler. She was wished to be a boy—as were her two older sisters, but failed. Iris was a rather scraggy child. At the age of 2, the family doctor looked at her, remarking: “such children die in 3rd world countries.” At the age of 4, she experienced food poisoning, and when delivered to the hospital the nuns looked at her and addressed her parents: “she is dying, we are too late—say good bye to her.” They did. She survived. Her parents picked her up 2 months later. She wasn't considered fit for school before the age of 7 ½. At the age 14, the local priest visited the family, declaring: I can't grant your daughter the confirmation, she is possessed by the devil. We spare you further juvenile failures, as they became deeper and darker and inform her artistic practice to this day, as most of her fictitious protagonists are survivors, sabotaging silently the rules of social restrictions, power and hierarchy in their own creative realms.*

an Interview with  
Iris Häussler  
on the Art of  
Failure



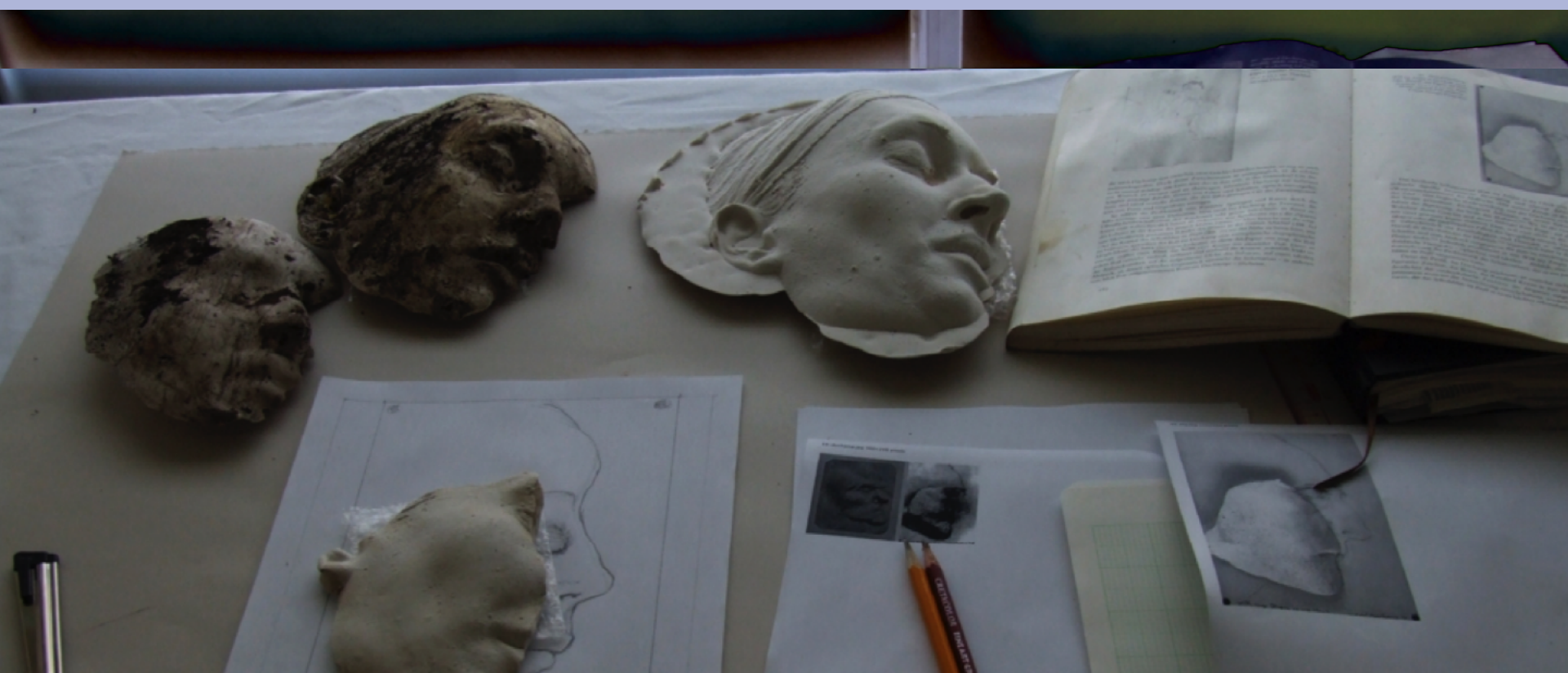
She then reflected on how failure became a grounding aspect in her practice from her earliest days as a working artist, studying at the Munich Academy of Fine Arts under Heribert Sturm, and the resulting freedoms it provided. Häussler is quick to credit Sturm's influence, citing an unorthodox teaching style that privileged experimentation and process-based learning. "We were rewarded for being daring and reckless," she says. Equally foundational was the fact that her education was free. "We paid for our materials, of course," she explained, "but everything else to do with the program was covered by the university. And that freedom to make and experiment, without having to worry, was crucial for me."

This way of working, beyond the concerns of the market and the pressures to produce for it, has manifested itself in variety of ways in Häussler's practice, which exists largely beyond the confines of institutional art spaces. Her installations have been mounted in diverse sites, often within the domesticated sphere of houses, apartments and hotel rooms, but also in the more public realm of historically designated heritage sites, fields and abandoned buildings. In her view, presenting works in this way allows viewers to develop independent and often highly affected personal responses directly to the stories, characters and objects at hand, unmediated by Häussler's own expectations as creator and the devices of

art historical contextualizations.

Similarly, by working through these characters, the artist has found a creative way to relinquish some of her own authority. In essence, Häussler views herself as the vessel through which these characters' stories are realized and disseminated. "When you use a character, it's similar to being a writer, you no longer have to take direct responsibility," she says. "What I mean when I say that Joseph [the central character in her 2006 work *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach*] taught me to sculpt is that I, as Iris, can't unlearn the art history of the 20th century. If you put me in the studio and say make a sculpture, I'm intimidated by my knowledge and it kills the creativity. What I do by having these characters is I refuse to accept this. Giving up complete control of Iris Häussler allows me to get back to my own body, like a child." And although her characters are freeing in this embodied, tactile way, they are simultaneously demanding, requiring an all-consuming intensity. They also refuse to keep regular hours. Häussler has been known to work through the night in service of her fictional collaborators.

When I pressed for an explanation of how, exactly, these characters come to be, she became very animated but also slightly coy, perhaps, in part, because it remains a mystery to her as well. She explained, "I start with a rough layout—





## *Britt Gallpen*

is an emerging curator and writer based in Toronto, Canada. She is currently an art history graduate student at York University where she is specializing in contemporary Canadian art as well as co-curator, with Yasmin Nurmang-Por, on the project “Arctic Noise” by artist Geronimo Inuitiq supported by the Mobilizing Inuit Cultural Heritage (MICH) project, a multi-year SSHRC Partnership grant. She is the web editorial intern at Canadian Art and recently completed an internship as curatorial assistant in Contemporary and Modern Art at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Her writing has appeared in the *Undergraduate Journal of Art History at the University of British Columbia*, *Canadian Art* and the *Art & Science Journal*.

it might be someone I’ve seen on the street years ago, someone digging in the garbage and pulling out aluminum wrappers for chocolate. Eventually this comes back to me and slowly it becomes form. I begin to write things down, I take notes and a portrait emerges. And eventually I place them, where do they live: in the city or in the suburbs, in an apartment or in the garden? When I do finally make it to the studio I’m able to completely embody these personas.” It’s conceivable, then, that these figures also provide a particular type of harbour from the direct impact of criticism, namely concerning the ethics of disclosure, that her projects have been known to incite.

One of the most interesting aspects of Häussler’s practice is the trace and longevity that are implicitly built in to her projects. Tellingly, during her public talk a member of the audience was pleased to report that he had only recently explained to his mother that she had been seduced, or duped depending on your preference, by the artist’s project. The mother was, in response, delighted by the reveal. Due to her meticulous attention to detail, Häussler’s immersive projects seem to be able to stand and exist without her ongoing support, a necessary step when attempting to remove herself from the grasp of her characters. “In terms of getting away and extracting myself from these figures, I reach a point of being so physically exhausted I must stop. Some have long lives and others have relatively short lives,” she says, meaning that some of her characters stay with her, pushing and prodding to be revisited. Indeed, Joseph Wagenbach persists so vividly that Häussler has cast a number of ‘his’ sculptures in bronze, something she explains is a consequence of his being stuck in a 20th century artist’s dream that is, in fact, her nightmare. Häussler will re-address Wagenbach, likely for the last time, as part of her current appointment as Louis Odette Sculptor-in-Residence at York University.

For her sake, let’s hope it’s his last hurrah. He sounds a little bossy.



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 From / De  
 Banff Coal Endowment Society  
 107 Tunnel Mountain Rd.  
 Banff, Alberta  
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 Widnes Road  
 Warrington, Cheshire, U.K.  
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☐ Other Documentation Autre documentation  
 Customs May be opened officially The sender warrants that the particulars given in this declaration are correct and the shipment does not contain dangerous or prohibited goods.  
 Douane Peut être ouverte officiellement L'expéditeur atteste dans cette déclaration que les renseignements sont exacts et que la marchandise ne contient pas d'articles dangereux ou interdits.  
 Signature Ryan Ferko Date:  
 43-074-253 (10-04)

# (Fake) Shipping (Real) Coal

ALISON COOLEY

Ryan Ferko tells me about his project, *Banff Coal Endowment Society*, from his studio at OCAD. In a building overlooked by steadily rising condominiums, Ferko is building inoperational telephone booths for Leslie Spit. We meet on March 29th—Earth Hour—and Ryan has just had news from OCAD's facilities services that the building, which houses the MFA studios and graduate gallery (where his studio-mate is hosting the opening reception for his show) will close early to accommodate the one hour of environmental-awareness darkness.

The condos and the impending Earth Hour are low hanging clouds over our conversation, circling with urgency. Each represents a fundamental aspect of Ferko's practice, which imagines heritage preservation and urban development as two competing characters in an ongoing story; each faceless and onward-pressing, they jostle with each other to enact changes in the landscape. Heritage, Ferko notes, is illusive—it only comes into existence when threatened, it is dependent on recognition and preservation.

Invited to participate in a Banff residency that coincided with the 2013 Liverpool Biennial, Ferko channeled his interest in heritage towards the port city of Liverpool. Once a hub for economy and trade, Liverpool has been experiencing steady depopulation since the 1930s, with its major industries shifting from the transatlantic trade of slaves, textiles, coal, salt, sugar and tobacco, to services, tourism and leisure. It now carries a sense of heritage as a port—and in a contemporary tourist





economy, this sense of heritage is a commodity resulting from its post-industrialism. Like Banff, which in 1984 became part of a UNESCO World Heritage site including several Rocky Mountain parks, Liverpool's cultural, architectural, imperial and trade heritage won it a 2004 UNESCO World Heritage designation. UNESCO confers World Heritage status to sites based on their "Outstanding Universal Value," and a set of six cultural and four natural criteria that measure sites' importance. A UNESCO designation is exactly the kind of legitimization that the heritage character in Ferko's ongoing urban story needs; the narrator announces her existence, the audience sympathizes with her, we begin to feel some responsibility to protect her.

Shortly following UNESCO's designation of the site, March 2007 saw the release of the proposal by the Peel Group, a real-estate, transport and infrastructure investment firm. Motivated by tourism and real estate sectors, Liverpool Waters is a commercial neighborhood rejuvenation project designed to "create a world-class, high-quality, mixed use waterfront quarter in central

Liverpool." Digital renderings of the development proposal display commercial strips, patches of park, cobblestone walkways around existing tourist sites and an outcropping of skyscrapers.

Ferko's development character had taken to the stage, and the resulting tussle between heritage and development played out first in language. Eager to suggest that Liverpool Waters would be a cultural destination, the Peel Group adopted a branding language that gestures to and mimics UNESCO's guiding principle of "Outstanding Universal Value." Ferko's research process pinpoints the relentless grasp for "Outstanding Universal Value" as a tool of legitimization, and a vague and illusive catchall mobilized by heritage and development organizations alike. A fundamental ambiguity emerges: which interventions are permissible to showcase and preserve original heritage, and which are detrimental to its existence?

In Banff, Ferko began to implicate himself in the unfolding drama between the two players. When he began his residency, UNESCO had formally declared Liverpool Waters a



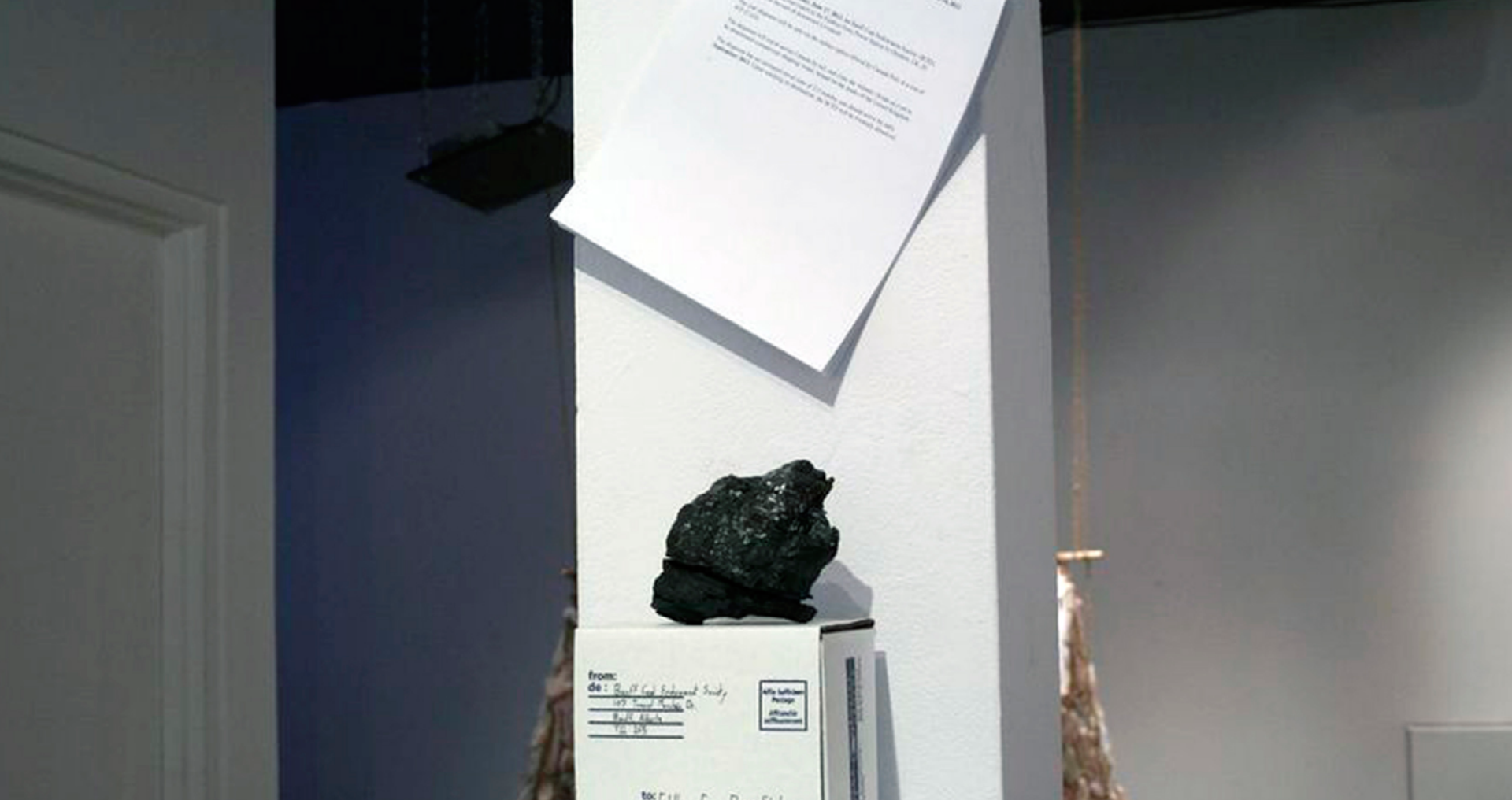


threat to the historical Maritime Mercantile City of Liverpool (or at least its UNESCO designation), but, nonetheless, Liverpool's municipal government and the federal Department for Communities and Local Government had given the proposal their approval to begin construction. Ferko took on the role of a corporate player, the Banff Coal Endowment Society, tasked with a single mandate: to transport a piece of coal from Banff's Bankhead Coal Mine (decommissioned in 1922 and now the site of a ghost town), to Fiddler's Ferry Power Station, a still-operational coal-fired power station in Cheshire (as close to Liverpool itself as Ferko could manage). Ferko's practice of small, doomed-to-fail interventions, like a kind of analogue hack, introduces an unexpected element into a system and observes as the system works it out. In the system's own disembodied, seemingly logic-less activities, a slew of hitherto unseen issues arise, pointing to fractures in bureaucratic and system logic, and in the irrational progression of everyday human activities.

Following the provocative processes of his intervention, Ferko aimed for his coal to be burned at Fiddler's Ferry, bridging the gap between the industrial past and present, and poetically joining Banff, a pristine holdout from Alberta's oil economy landscape, with the mixed and transitional economies of northwestern England. The parallel between Banff and Liverpool is not a seamless one—rather, Ferko forces it. The cities' economies, populations, histories and geographies vary distinctly—the UNESCO protection, a uniting factor, is also a heavy contrast. Though Banff exemplifies natural beauty, Liverpool is a relic of an economy gone by. Within Ferko's forced parallel, however, is both a criticism of the sweeping generality (and impossibility) of UNESCO's mandate to locate and preserve the most significant representations of culture, nature and heritage, and a fundamental preoccupation with the relationship of our contemporary technological and post-industrial age with its immediate predecessor.

Ferko describes a major part of his process as involving “committing [him]self to a logic.” As the Banff Coal Endowment Society, Ferko employs a corporate logic on a scale so small and manageable as to be ridiculous. He began by scouting an ideal piece of coal—laden with all the Outstanding Universal Value he could manage—then packaged and shipped it. The illicit behaviour of removing a natural fixture such as coal from Banff was eclipsed, at least, by the coal's mundaneness—not the glacial lake, a piece of canyon or a fossil from the Burgess Shale, the lump of coal's heritage value seemed minimal in comparison to Banff's grander





things. Ferko registered the Banff Coal Endowment Society (or BCES) with the Scottish and Southern Energy company (SSE plc) as a coal supplier. Upon shipping the coal by Canada Post ground transport for \$35, which Ferko expected to take two and a half months, he began to document

The coal departed Banff on June 22nd, 2013. Its first few steps were promising: the coal was accepted and processed in Banff, then processed in a Mississauga postal facility, was shipped overseas from Quebec, arrived successfully in the United Kingdom and then... in late August, the item was rejected by its intended recipient, and began its journey back to Banff. (Ferkko, naturally, had left the town once his residency was complete, and was no longer there to receive the package.)

Tracking the coal on its return journey, Ferko documents a strange set of actions; the coal returned to Calgary, and eventually Banff, where Ferko hoped it might close the loop, expressing an ultimate, but poetic failure of bureaucracy. But for several weeks the coal bounced back and forth between postal outlets across Canada, before eventually landing in a

Scarborough post office for inspection. Ferko's attempts to regain the coal as an artistic object have also been failures. The Scarborough office refuses to release the object back to him, and insists that if it passes inspection, his coal shipment will continue its winding journey through the post.

*Banff Coal Endowment Society's* failure lies not only in the organization's inability to fulfill its simple mandate of shipping coal. In addition, the productive failure of Ferko's gesture is made apparent by the energy consumption required to affect the lump of coal's circuitous journey across the world. While the energy potential of the coal itself is minimal, the energy expended shipping the coal from Banff to Montreal in the parcel's first journey alone is relatively great. Mulling over Earth Hour with Ferko in his studio, it becomes apparent that much of the *Banff Coal Endowment Society* project deals with this kind of relativism—how much energy are we willing to expend in everyday activities (both personal and professional), and where (if at all) is this energy recuperated? What is the relative potential of an environmental spectacle compared to steady systemic change?



Which societies are relatively more or less industrial in a modern age? How do universal sets of guidelines that eschew relativism (such as UNESCO's heritage criteria) come to take shape?

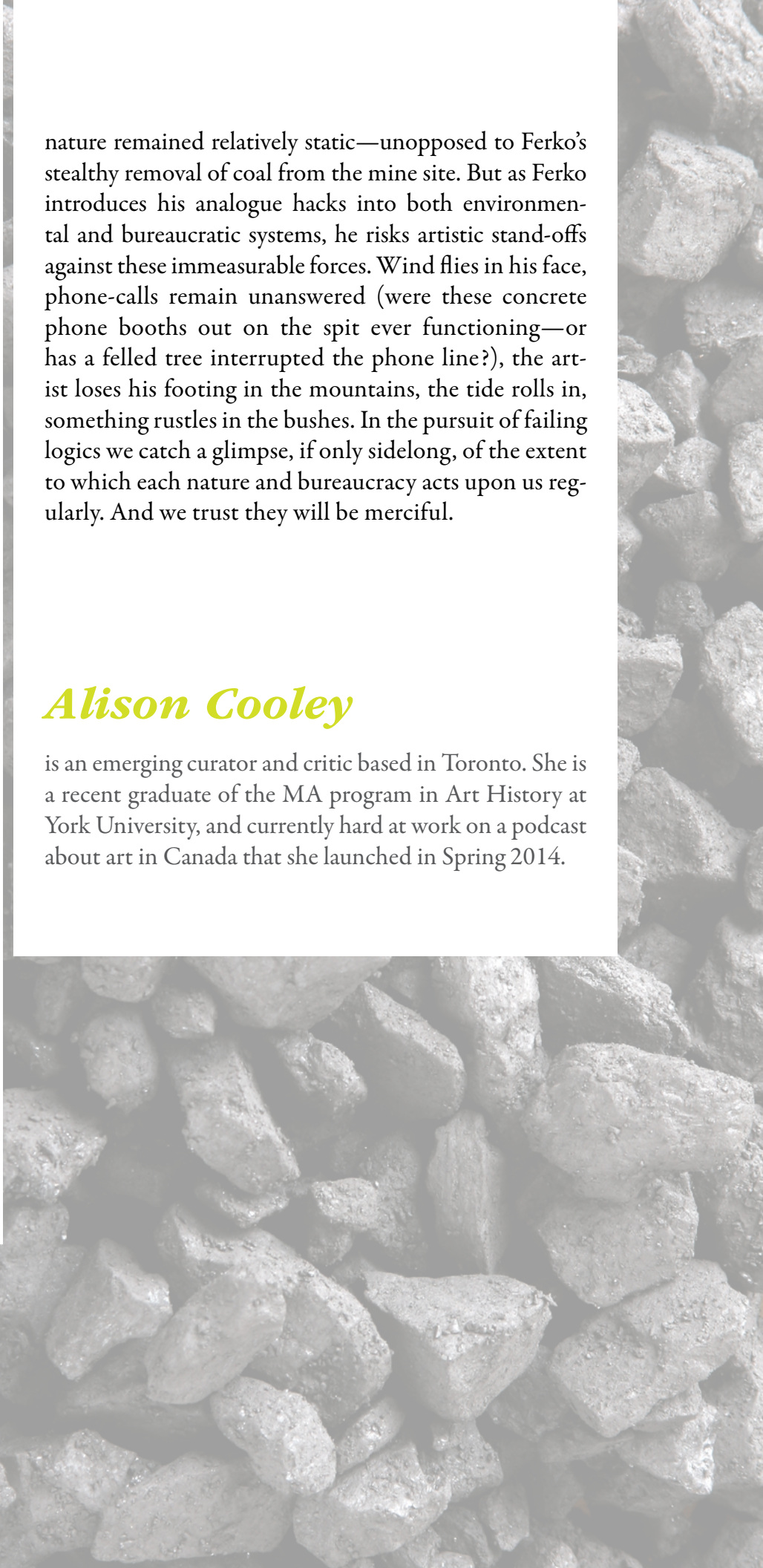
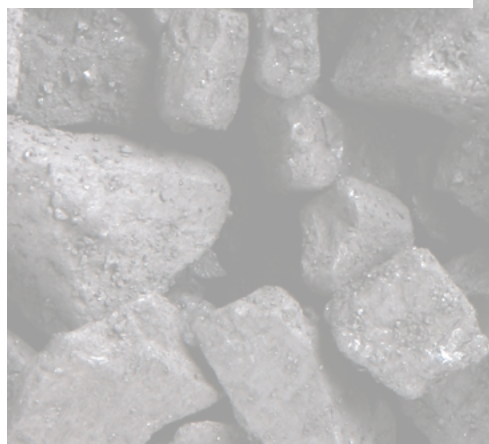
Perhaps, however, the greatest failure in *Banff Coal Endowment Society* is a failure to address the unknown. Feigning a corporate identity in order to get inside the bureaucratic system and execute his hack, Ferko puts his faith in a de-centralized structure beyond the two characters of heritage and development. Despite Ferko's attempts to occupy an insider's position, the Banff Coal Endowment Society, a corporate name intended to legitimize his efforts, also obscures his own identity, and impedes his ability to act beyond corporate guidelines. The actual processes of bureaucracy Ferko willingly enters into quickly begin to operate beyond his control.

Ferko describes another project he pursued in Banff—a published Liverpool heritage walk, representative of a prescribed notion of how to experience heritage—the shape of which he superimposed on Banff's landscape, and distributed to Banff's tourists. Following the prescribed walk, Ferko was stopped by a barbed wire fence protecting an airport, and forced to cut through a field. Having committed himself to the bad idea of following Liverpool's superimposed walking tour of Banff, he eventually happened upon some bones; the remains of a cougar's prey. The danger of his own failing logic became palpable. Nature, too, serves as an unknown in Ferko's practice. While *Banff Coal Endowment Society* relies on natural resources as a fundamental underpinning for the project, nature's actions, like the inexorable progression of bureaucracy, are the work's great unknowns. This time,

nature remained relatively static—unopposed to Ferko's stealthy removal of coal from the mine site. But as Ferko introduces his analogue hacks into both environmental and bureaucratic systems, he risks artistic stand-offs against these immeasurable forces. Wind flies in his face, phone-calls remain unanswered (were these concrete phone booths out on the spit ever functioning—or has a felled tree interrupted the phone line?), the artist loses his footing in the mountains, the tide rolls in, something rustles in the bushes. In the pursuit of failing logics we catch a glimpse, if only sidelong, of the extent to which each nature and bureaucracy acts upon us regularly. And we trust they will be merciful.

## Alison Cooley

is an emerging curator and critic based in Toronto. She is a recent graduate of the MA program in Art History at York University, and currently hard at work on a podcast about art in Canada that she launched in Spring 2014.



IF YOU LOOK  
GOOD DURING  
YOUR PERFORMANCE  
ANCE, YOU ARE  
PROBABLY DOING  
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# I WUD PREFER NOT 2

## Notes on Failure, Refusal and Fraud in Recent Media Art

This text is derived from the digital project, I WUD PREFER NOT 2, Jacqueline Mabey presented at *Fail Again, Fake Better*.

*For Siân Evans, for her wisdom and practice of everyday love*

Failure is a tough nut to crack. Its manifestations are myriad: while the path to success is singular, infinite are the roads to failure. I choose to embrace this gift of excess and drift, following a peripatetic course. I desire for you, dear reader, to join me in this vagrancy, and together we will “wander, improvise, fall short, and move in circles. We will lose our way, our cars, our agenda, and possibly our minds, but in losing we will find another way of making meaning in which... no one gets left behind.”

Not all who wander are lost. Here, our North Star is Herman Melville’s novella, *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street* (1853), the story of a young scrivener, or law-copyist, told from the point of view of his former employer. B. begins his tenure as an eager employee, but eventually stops copying, replying to his employer’s repeated, exasperated requests by saying “I would prefer not to” and nothing more. He stops eating, he refuses to leave his place of work, and is eventually carted off to The Tombs where he wastes away and dies.

We turn our eyes towards B. not *just* because of his recalcitrance, but also for the other clinging ghosts. Before B. was a scrivener, he worked in the Dead Letter Office of the United States Post, where mail that cannot be delivered to the addressee or returned to the sender goes to be rifled through and destroyed. This makes B. Cassandra-like, cursed with the gift of foresight. Written shortly before the American Civil War (1861-1865), in a period of simmering turmoil,

the mail clerk is privy to the coming storm via his access to the communication breakdowns happening within and across communities. Later, as a scrivener, he cannot go on copying or reproducing the law that creates that alienation.

To embrace failure, in all its forms, is to desire another kind of world. It is to endeavor to create a community not originating from the Law of the Father or the laws of demand, Big Data or Too Big to Fail, but held together by different kinds of bonds. In a moment of economic precarity and environmental depletion, I seek to understand how gestures of failure, refusal and fraud can work as anti-capitalist strategies. Moreover, I wonder how they could suggest changes in the formation of the fabric of the social that, unlike Bartleby, do not disappear.

*But here I am, dear reader, failing again,  
putting the end at the beginning.*

*FDIC Insured* (2008-present) by Michael Mandiberg exists both as a digital archive and a selection of book works with the logos from failed Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) Insured banks laser cut into the covers of personal finance guides bought off the dollar racks at The Strand bookstore in New York City.

In its ideal state, the conversion of a failed bank happens over a weekend. At the end of the working day on Friday, representatives from the FDIC swoop in, inform the employees

of the bank of its failure and begin a massive financial autopsy. By Monday morning, any trace of the original bank has disappeared: bought out by a former rival, many of the original employees are gone, and the entire visual signage has changed. These logos and the failures they represent disappear from our memory. They disappear from the clutter of the visual landscape. They are even erased from the Internet and its many archives.

Capitalism is a loser-producing machine: "Failure, of course, goes hand in hand with capitalism. A market economy must have winners and losers." And yet, because of the obfuscating machinations of power, structural and ideological, popular narrative holds that the fault lies in our stars. It's as if our dear B. saw the writing on the wall: our use of the word failure shifts after the Civil War, from a discrete event that happened to you to a state of being.

Looking at *FDIC Insured*, there's something so perfect about the sad, second hand advice books that the logos are etched into, the very proof of the lie of class mobility, perhaps the most pernicious American myth. The work makes manifest these myths and the structure that makes them invisible. Row upon row, implausible books and broken banks create a speculative space to imagine life after capitalism.

A modern-day B.: Pilvi Takala's installation *The Trainee* (2008). The artist posed as trainee "Johanna Takala" in the marketing department of Deloitte, a financial consulting firm. Over the course of the month-long performance, Takala sits at her desk or at a table in the tax department library, staring straight ahead or she rides the elevator doing what she calls "brain work." But she completes no assignments, and does not even have a computer at her desk, bewildering and unsettling her colleagues.

In his book *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, Jonathan Crary delineates the dehumanizing effects of our 24/7 life-world and how the neo-liberal race to the bottom and its expectation of continuous labour is making incursions into sleep, which he calls "an uncompromising interruption of the theft of time from us by capitalism." Part and parcel of this process are the structures of surveillance and self-surveillance that demand the performance of perpetual disclosure, instrumentalizing our participation in culture and doing the state's work as part of our endless toil. Thus, with *The Trainee*, Takala's persistent inactivity is unsettling to her colleagues because it does not take the form of other kinds of labouring, e.g. checking Facebook. The inscrutability of B. and *The Trainee*, their rejection of transparency before the Eye of Power, is untenable to it.

Much is made in the novella of B.'s exhaustion, his physical wasting, his wraith-like presence:

What shall I do? I now said to myself, buttoning up my coat to the last button. What shall I do? what ought I to do? what does conscience say I should do with this man, or rather ghost. Rid myself of him, I must; go, he shall. But how? You will not thrust him, the poor, pale, passive mortal, you will not thrust such a helpless creature out of your door? you will not dishonor yourself by such cruelty? No, I will not, I cannot do that. Rather would I let him live and die here, and then mason up his remains in the wall. What then will you do? For all your coaxing, he will not budge. Bribes he leaves under your own paperweight on your table; in short, it is quite plain that he prefers to cling to you.

In "Exhaustion and Exuberance: Ways to Defy the Pressure to Perform," Jan Verwoert suggests that the condition of exhaustion produced by high performance culture could be the beginnings of a kind of operative community. One that can use "the traditional know-how of casual uncooperativeness" to open up "the space of echo and delay."

Of echo and delay: what hope I find in the casual uncooperativeness of Collaborations #1-6 (2010-2011) by Ei Jane Janet Lin and Miao Jiaxin.

The work was made while the artists were pursuing MFAs (graduate school—an exhausted community of over-achievers if there ever was one). They staged a series of performances on the interactive, amateur porn site Cam4, at once invoking and straying wildly from the conventions of porn: badly lip synced moans, strange domestic tableaux, sexualized racial stereotypes, rimming assholes with lipstick, literal answers to lewd chat, post-apocalyptic scenography, a body obscured by money, an



endless parade of peculiarity. These performances are many things, but none of them are erotic. They get it wrong, again and again.

A tour around the Cam4 site and one realizes that very little about it is amateur. The advertising copy of the Surecom Corporation, the site's owner, is like that of any other multinational-derived social media platform: the bland prose of bad faith, setting the stage for the exploitation of user generated content. This space of supposed perversion seems to thrive on conformity—performer coaching and tips on how to make bucks on Cam4—leaving very little room for surprises. Indeed, in this community of surveillance, the artists' IP addresses were blocked repeatedly, forcing them to take their freaky show on the road. The *Collaborations* straight-faced frauds open up another space, inviting “us to unthink sex as that alluring narrative of connection and liberation and to think of it anew as the site of failure and unbecoming conduct.”

My unbecoming nature leads me to see an analogy between the instrumentalization of amateur porn and the professionalization of the arts. Both involve the draining out of spontaneity and the forms of unknowing that can emerge from the process of art making/reception and sex, respectively, with the end result of neutralizing the threat of either. To be clear, dear reader, I think that the proliferation of MFA programs, curatorial programs, PhDs for artists and general uptick in grad school attendance produces a chilling effect, raising the barriers to entry to the art world. There's no more room for fuck ups. But there's no art without fuck ups, no art without failure.

Where do these gifts lead us? In our drifting, we wind up back at the beginning. B.'s desire to be otherwise is ultimately fruitless grasping, a clinging ghost, because his gestures are not generative of community. But now, in this moment, across our cultural landscape we see repeated, strategic uses of failure—here, in some recent art that visualizes the deficiencies of the system, that refuses to reproduce it, that dumbfound expectation—this gives me hope for its worlding potential. Dear reader, to me these works seem to suggest that by embracing failure, by leading where it follows, we can find a way to be politically present but inscrutable, evading and dumbfounding state and economic surveillance. Not to disappear, but to refuse to perform. We are exhausted like B., but we are not alone. These bedeviling, script-flipping art works give us hints of a world unknown. A space to speculate, a space to refuse, a space to be other than. A space where we can finally gather together.

## *Jacqueline Mabey*

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# CAPITALISM AND CONTEMPORANEITY: On Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave*

EDWARD BAHAAL

On the respective topics of failure and forgery, Jeremy Deller's 2001 performance piece, *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001)[1] is particularly germane. In confronting the defeat and dejection of a past politics, particularly by recreating the historical failures that weigh upon the present, this work comes to define our current reality as one born of failure itself. Of course, this is not to understand "failure" in its conventional, negative sense, but to describe a position from which to approach any sort of progressive politics. In light of the "triumphs" of globalization, the unabated advance of neo-liberal rationality and corporate culture and the cultivation of political power in favour of such forces, one might wonder if failure does not represent the paradigmatic condition of contemporary socio-political consciousness (if not that of the post-1968, or at least post-Berlin Wall, era). That is to ask: is failure a tenable condition by which opposition can be, or in fact is, articulated—at least to the extent that it urges us to think and act outside the cognitive and ideological structures of victory, success and productive functionality? Inasmuch as failure represents a conscientious opting-out of this overarching mindset—a refusal to take part in the perpetuation of success as a force of material and cultural production—it serves as a pre-condition for an interminable drive toward the just. In a world in which, *pace* Beckett, one can't go on but must go on, one can only aspire to fail better, lest one realizes a politics for which *realization* constitutes regressive totalization.

This is the sense in which I want to consider Deller's piece, a large-scale dramatic re-enactment of the so-called "Battle of Orgreave" that occurred in the eponymous Northern English coal-mining town. The battle, a clash between miners and police that marked a climactic moment in the former's 1984 strike, has from its outset attained notoriety in English socio-political history. Nevertheless, as Deller's impetus to re-enact it suggests, the critical immediacy of the event has faded from the national imagination: as Ralph Rugoff explains, "the collective memory of this 'battle' ha[s] fallen prey to social amnesia that accompanied New Labour's 'Cool Britannia' make-over (which was predicated on keeping a distance from anything to do with aggrieved unions and class confrontation)."[2] Indeed, the strike itself marked an historic turning point in the political life of Britain, inasmuch as it marked the Thatcher government's first successful attempt to defeat the unions—unions that, as Stuart Hall describes, the Thatcher government "regarded as one of the principal forces blocking the path to privatisation and the reconstruction of Britain as a neo-liberal 'market-society.'"[3] Given, then, the dominance of Thatcherism that followed the strike, and the further development of post-industrial capitalism under New Labour, history has not favoured the losers. Hence, it is against dubious historicizations that conceive the strikers' defeat as a neo-liberal triumph over organized labour and the welfare state that Deller reconsiders Orgreave's legacy; as such, he calls for





Orgreave's revival in collective memory alongside a reappraisal of how one can or should represent such socio-political events within the project of constructing history.

To this end, Deller adopts the vernacular of historic battle re-enactments (a longstanding tradition in British culture), employing roughly eight hundred members of historical re-enactment societies and two hundred former miners to re-stage "the battle." Assembling in Orgreave en-masse and in full costume, the re-enactors dramatized the stand-offs and violent confrontations that occurred between police and miners, including scenes of grouped picketers collectively chanting, waves of riot police chasing miners down fields and the brawls fought between these groups. In the absence of a definitive account of the event, Deller predominantly based this portrayal off testimony he received from former participants, who were thus permitted

to invest their own experiences into the account. (Among the primary documents accompanying the work is a book of first-hand accounts of, and original songs and poems from, the strike. Likewise, the re-enactment itself was subsequently broadcast on television, in a documentary format that featured interviews Deller conducted with the former participants.)<sup>[4]</sup> To be sure, the prominence of Deller's research (which he conducted for two years) is all the more significant given the extent to which the British media intensely overdetermined the original event: the pervasive influence of populist, right-wing tabloids purveying the incumbent ideology of Thatcherism played a significant role in determining the representation of the strike, as did, alternately, the countering voice of left-leaning papers. This media battle, in which different sides fought over the representation of miners, their clashes with police and the public persona of National Union of Mineworkers leader, Arthur Scargill, rendered

the strike, and no less “the battle,” a most divisive issue. Consequently, all subsequent representations of the event have had to contend with the ideologically determined simulations by which the media constructed it. Deller’s efforts in *re-constructing* it, then, work to highlight this very constructedness, and so consider how Orgreave’s iterations have determined the meanings and functions it acquires in public consciousness.

On a less literal level, the work depicts the changing face of British society following the strike. Against the growing order of economic neo-liberalism that the Thatcher government helped spread throughout the “developed” West, Deller faces a larger challenge: representing these scarcely visible and increasingly naturalized socio-economic shifts within the spaces of working and middle-class life he depicts. In this respect, my concern is that this neo-liberal order places great pressure on history itself: the ideological naturalization of neo-liberalism occurring between 1984 and 2001 (which has since only intensified), and which saw a decisive victory in Thatcher’s surmounting of once deeply powerful unions, demands efforts to represent these socio-economic shifts as historic constructions, rather than accepted states of socio-political nature. The work of defining contemporary socio-political consciousness thus necessitates a significant dosage of self-critical history in order to demystify the hegemony of capitalism in the age of globalization. The task Deller sets, then, is to delve into history in order to establish narratives that counter those instilled by accepted neo-liberal myths. In doing so, he forwards terms with which to critically think about art and politics in contemporary Britain.

As a young artist working at the turn of the millennium, Deller’s work functions in ambivalent relation to the socio-cultural circumstances that affect artistic production in his time and place. Like many of his peers, he works with an eye to mass culture, media and national identity; however, he arguably resists the aesthetic pandering and marketability that was particularly pronounced in the worst of British art of the time. On this point, we may take our cue from Julian Stallabrass, whose 1999 book *High Art Lite* charts the dominant vicissitudes of British art in the 1990s. In particular, Stallabrass describes how encompassing economic and market

forces shaped the ground for a new generation of artists in the UK (i.e. the “young British artists” or *yBas*, a term Stallabrass rejects in favour of the more derisive “high art lite”) to come to the fore. For instance, Stallabrass cites the 1989 UK recession as a condition of possibility for high art lite’s emergence, given the extent to which economic downturns destabilized the UK art market on both domestic and international scales. As local galleries fought to stay afloat, as artists struggled to show (let alone sell) their work and as collectors found themselves unable to afford pricey international art, a marked turn to the new, local and DIY took hold. (For instance, artists began using abandoned spaces to curate work from their own social circles while arch-collectors like Charles Saatchi began to take especial notice—particularly, in Saatchi’s case, after financial stress led him to sell off his own lavish international art collection.) [5] On the other side of this equation, Stallabrass describes how this turn toward young British art brought with it new artistic interest in mass culture and media (and implicitly, national identity), suggesting a bridging of high and low through a demystification of artistic elitism. The result, however, was a pointed increase in efforts to publicize and market the artist-qua-image, such that most of this art—still heavily entrenched in high-art-market culture—lost in criticality what it gained in accessibility (hence: “high art lite”).

What, then, does this account tell us about *The Battle of Orgreave*? Aside from perhaps explaining Deller’s DIY approach and interest in mass media, culture and national identity, it expounds the root material conditions that influenced art production of his time and place. In particular, we may read Deller’s work vis-à-vis Stallabrass’s intent to critique the received narrative of contemporary British art: “a tale of tough entrepreneurs braving the harsh circumstances of the recession to produce an art fit for the bracing climate of the untrammled free market, and capable of holding its own against the spectacular productions of mass culture.” [6] Moreover, we may locate Deller’s work in relation to the fact that the UK recession’s effects on British art parallel, as Stallabrass hints, “the successive recessions that tore up British manufacturing industry and led to the rise of service-oriented businesses.” [7] I am specifically interested in this idea because it concerns the same socio-political shift *The Battle of Orgreave* points to: the turn to a post-Fordist economy of immaterial production that has obscured the traditional socio-political role of the industrial working class (that which Northern



English mining unions exemplify, for example). This form of post-Fordist immaterial labour, coupled with the globalized dispersion of production that neo-liberalism has allowed (e.g. through pervasive outsourcing), has come to increasingly represent the face of contemporary multinational capitalism in the developed West. As a result, art faces a new set of responsibilities in contending with the intrusion of capitalist hegemony in the cultural sphere, particularly with respect to the changing avenues by which artistic production and labour enters into the market. In sum, one can then critique high art lite to the extent that it embraces the marketing of lifestyle and the aggressive commodification of contemporary capitalism (here we need only think of the excesses of Damian Hirst's spectacular, hypercommodified art) and for thereby submitting to a post-industrial capitalist rationality. Recalling Stallabrass, it should be clear how, in the face of these socio-economic shifts, much art of this time and place trades in its critical autonomy precisely to enter into the untrammelled free market and the spectacular production of mass culture.

To the extent that a work like *The Battle of Orgreave* resists these tendencies, it does so by countering the neo-liberal climate in which they have flourished. In addition to eschewing the private art market (inasmuch as the work was made for Artangel, a not-for-profit public art agency) *The Battle of Orgreave* takes a critical stance against the encroachment of capitalist ideology into contemporary art production. In contrast to the aestheticization of neo-liberal politics one finds with the yBas (those accordingly dubbed "children of Thatcher" ), Deller makes the social conditions underlying the former his aesthetic focus. This amounts to setting out what Frederic Jameson defines as "an aesthetic of cognitive mapping—a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system..." Within Jameson's canonical theorization of postmodernism as the manifest cultural logic of late capitalism, such practices of cognitive mapping represent a response to the subjective spatial and temporal disorganization found in contemporary culture. These practices thus serve as means by which to locate subjectivities and identities in relation to an otherwise fragmented experience of a world multinational capitalism has suffused. It is as such, Jameson further writes,

that "we may be able to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as social confusion." Jameson's account of postmodernism thus remains useful not only for elaborating this spatial and social confusion as an effect of advanced capitalism, but also because it simultaneously reveals the temporal and historical complexities the latter involves. This is to say, the overall transformations multinational capitalism heralds, including its productions of space and its intrusions into the field of culture, equally signal a crisis in the experience of history. Just as, for instance, globalized flows of capital witness the deracination of place within the increasingly virtual space of finance, so too is time strained by this logic. Hence:

The crisis in historicity now dictates a return, in a new way, to the question of temporal organization in general in the post-modern force field, and indeed, to the problem of the form that time, temporality, and the syntagmatic will be able to take in a culture increasingly dominated by space and spatial logic. If, indeed, the subject has lost its capacity actively to extend its pro-tensions and re-tensions across the temporal manifold and to organize its past and future into coherent experience, it becomes difficult enough to see how the cultural productions of such a subject could result in anything but "heaps of fragments" and in a practice of the randomly heterogeneous and fragmentary and the aleatory.

A consideration of this disorganization of temporal experience brings us to *The Battle of Orgreave's* most pointed function, which is to intervene in the experience of history to not only map subjectivities but to articulate critical positions from which they may be redefined. In other words, in remaking past events Deller participates in the present making of history so that alternate narratives may emerge from it. Meanwhile, in eschewing received representations that ignore or dubiously interpret Orgreave's past, he opts to make history a collective, participatory and immediate experience. In sum, he makes the representation of history—that is, its coterminous interpretation and enactment—the material by which he effects his critique. As such, this relation to historiography evinces what Hal Foster has identified as an "archival impulse" (or, more simply, a turn to archival methods) that has flourished in recent art. As Foster observes, a newfound concern with history and his-



torical investigation has led inquiring artists to turn to the more maligned and forgotten people, places and things of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In addition to an interest in historical research, this impulse manifests itself as new form of archive-making in and of itself, given the efforts of artists to establish their own informal means of ordering unofficial histories. For example, in the case of *The Battle of Orgreave* (and in addition to the broadcast documentary feature and book that accompany it), the work conventionally appears in galleries as a kind of museological archive, complete with artefacts, illustrated timelines, accessible books and audio recordings, vitrines and a projection of the documentary. This is a work, essentially, that is distinctly the product of Deller's extensive research; its function, accordingly, is to create and offer a foundation of knowledge by which to situate oneself in relation to history—or, more precisely, to navigate the archives through which one comes to understand history in relation to oneself and vice versa. Indeed, the point is not simply to assert another set of historical truths legitimated by the institutional function of the museum, but to engage discussion within informal settings. This model thus outlines new terms with which to construct historical knowledge, doing so in ways that allows participants and viewers to redefine subjectivity through the development of informal historical archives.

Moreover, this impulse works in distinction to the radical temporal compression of advanced capitalism—the amnesiac immediacy of the postmodern present—to undo a sense of subjective desensitization to the experience of history. Recreating an event from less than two decades past—or as Deller notes, from within living memory — counters a general sense of alienation from one's own history. Against the temporal condensation of postmodernism and the obscuring of history that is endemic to advanced capitalism, this reenactment

of history decompresses memory and expands time. In sum, it opens avenues of historical knowledge that denaturalize neoliberalism's ahistoricity and so allow one to understand one's location within an expansive social history. In this respect, Deller furthermore evokes what Mark Godfrey has labelled “the artist as historian,” which is to say that Deller takes on the task of not only representing history, but of actively and strategically working within its structures. Here, art becomes a vehicle to “invite viewers to think about the past; to make connections between events, characters, and objects; to join together in memory; and to reconsider the ways in which the past is represented in wider culture.”

And it is precisely as such that *The Battle of Orgreave*, Godfrey himself writes, “point[s] to the way in which English history tends to be addressed only when romanticized and no longer deemed to be of political impact.”

As such, *The Battle of Orgreave* works upon these historical perversities in order to conjure Orgreave's present relevance within the contemporary experience of history. Against the postmodern disorientation of time that undermines the relation between past, present and future, and which consequently renders history flat and impenetrable, Deller's project attempts to impart a sense of historical consciousness by staging history and, in the same inextricable gesture, its representation. As such, it invokes history while undermining the authority it assumes in its hegemonic form, thereby disassembling the imposed historical structures that neglect the political import of Orgreave's past. In this capacity, Deller finds a critical passage between (to borrow Godfrey's categories) the increasingly amnesiac nature of globalized capitalist culture and mass media's increasingly spectacularized and romanticized representations of history. Deller constructs a history that is at once present, critical and self-critical, and that neither renders its object a mute simulation nor a hazy, romantic vision; instead, he iterates history through its intimate relation to its spaces and to those it has directly affected. He does so, moreover, by extending that intimate relation to the wider collectivity of the work's participants and, indeed, to its viewers. Deller therefore operates as a critical historian, insofar as “the critical historian,” Godfrey notes via Hayden White, “must proceed on the basis of the realization that she has to invent a language adequate to the representation of historical reality for her own time and place of work.”

In sum, a historiographic or archival approach not only illuminates the particularities of Deller's work, but effectively locates the political functions of its most critical expressions. Indeed, Deller takes history on as a system that has become inextricable from its ideological perversions, and so operates both in and against it. He offers a history through his own work while demanding a critical meta-historical analysis that should allow us to situate our and other histories into a larger framework, namely one that takes into



account the ideological mediations of contemporary capitalist culture. Thus, as Benjamin Buchloh describes in another context:

The telling of history as a sequence of events acted out by individual agents is displaced by a focus on the simultaneity of separate but contingent social frameworks and an infinity of participating agents, and the process of history is reconceived as a structural system of perpetually changing interactions and permutations between economic and ecological givens, class formations and their ideologies, and the resulting types of social and cultural interactions specific to each particular moment.

[17]

Viewing *The Battle of Orgreave* in this vein, we may begin to see how it instances a politicization of aesthetics by intervening in the cultural productions of capitalist hegemony. It does so by not only reconstructing history from the ground up, but by doing so in a way that is inclusive of the many factors—be they people, places, objects, or practices—that converge in the making of the work and of history. Finally, by iterating itself in the fallout of the past's failed political aspirations, *The Battle of Orgreave* reveals the quality of our present condition, in which yesterday's utopian goals have fallen out of reach. Of course, it is only in the very absence and failure of utopia that one can continue to move in the direction of that which utopia promises but can never deliver. *The Battle of Orgreave* makes no such promises and holds no illusions that it can reproduce the original event in order to retroactively achieve its failed goals; instead, it urges us to take up its expanded history in the present, to adopt a history of failure, in order to orient ourselves toward a different future.

## Edward Bacal

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I WILL  
TAKE  
BUT I WILL **NOT**  
PARTICIPATE



# *Jeder Mensch ein Terrorist*

## *Joseph Beuys at documenta V*

*Our aims:*

*The independence of art—for the revolution;*

*The revolution—for the complete liberation of art!*

—André Breton and Leon Trotsky, “Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art” (1938)

### I

In the summer of 2007, the German arts magazine *Monopol* organized a photography project involving a number of contemporary German artists, writers, musicians and actors. Each participant was invited to recreate in part a 1972 sculpture by Joseph Beuys titled, “Dürer, ich führe persönlich Baader + Meinhof durch die Dokumenta [sic] V, J. Beuys” [“Dürer, I’ll guide Baader + Meinhof through Documenta V personally, J. Beuys”], in reference to the leaders of the Rote Armee Fraktion (RAF), a leftist terrorist group active in West Germany throughout the 1970s, the Northern Renaissance painter Albrecht Dürer and the international contemporary art exhibition “documenta.” For each photograph in the series, *Monopol* fabricated the sculpture’s iconic yellow placards and titular message in black and asked each artist to substitute “Baader + Meinhof” for the cultural figure of their choice. The selections ranged from contemporary pop figures such as Paris Hilton and the celebrity Berlin polar bear Knut to prominent politicians like Tony Blair and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

In the majority of their renditions, *Monopol*’s participants used the second-person direct address of Beuys’s placards to stage fantastical meetings at documenta, then

in its twelfth incarnation, in efforts to humanize celebrity figures, resolve long-standing conflict and reconsider notorious pariahs. The singer Inga Humpe invited convicted German female murderers who had killed their children to attend the exhibition as a revisionist, compensatory gesture. Musician Herbert Grönemeyer invited Tony Blair and Charlton Heston in hopes of influencing the British Prime Minister and actor-turned-National Rifle Association leader away from violent policy toward more peaceful politics: “Ein Gang über die documenta nimmt die Waffen aus dem Kopf” [“A trip through documenta gets rid of thoughts of weapons”], Grönemeyer wrote in commentary accompanying his photograph. In the premises of the *Monopol* project, the art then on display at documenta and Beuys’s own 1972 intervention provided a generally therapeutic moment for those in attendance, an environment in which past conflicts, problematic politics and failed opportunities could be re-enacted and redeemed.

Yet, despite the humanist narratives at play in the *Monopol* campaign, the project responded to what was a heated, controversial debate surrounding the German historical treatment of the RAF, and art’s role therein. Beuys’s sculpture was prominently included in a 2005 exhibition at Berlin’s KW Institute for Contemporary Art titled *Zur Vorstellung des Terrors: Die RAF-Ausstellung*, curated by Klaus Biesenbach, Ellen Blumenstein and Felix Ensslin. The exhibition assembled a number of artworks, ranging in date from the 1960s to the early 2000s that dealt with representations and symbolic associations in the German imaginary of the RAF and



their most infamous activities, such as the freeing of Andreas Baader by the feminist journalist-turned-RAF-leader Ulrike Meinhof and the RAF's 1977 abduction and murder of the industrialist Hanns-Martin Schleyer.

During documenta V, Beuys installed "*Dürer, ich führe*" in his primary contribution to the exhibition, titled "*Büro der Organization für direkte Demokratie*," an open installation in which participants were invited to discuss pressing political issues with Beuys himself. Yet the performance artist Thomas Peiter, who played the role of Albrecht Dürer in full costume for the duration of documenta, in fact created the placards, inscribing Beuys's message, save one omitted clause: "dann sind sie resozialisiert" ["then they will be resocialized"].

What follows here is an exploration of the political and aesthetic questions surrounding Beuys and Peiter's interaction and collaborative sculpture, specifically the relation between the "resocializing" project of art and the threat posed by the most radical variation of resistant politics, violent terrorism.

In a series of published interviews focusing on his documenta installation, Beuys outlined his famous *erweiterer Kunstbegriff*, or the "expanded concept of art" that sought to unite the political and the aesthetic under a general rubric of "creativity." Beuys and Peiter's interactions at documenta V, I argue, challenge the implications of a social vision founded on the merits of art production and, in this case, respond to the activist pressure instigated by the RAF's violent politics. I want to suggest here that "*Dürer, ich führe*" stages the breaking point of Beuys's humanism in its confrontation with the ethically inassimilable imperative of the RAF's violence. The placards thematize the deep political investment in categorical definitions of art, and the challenge posed by an aesthetics willing to account for the intersection of art, terrorism and violence.

## II

As described by art historian Claudia Mesch, Beuys's involvement in documenta V followed a number of activist efforts organized primarily through the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. In 1970, Beuys, along with two students, formed the Organization der Nichtwähler für freie Volksabstimmung [Organization of Non-Voters for free Referenda], a political

project committed to replacing West Germany's partisan voting system with *Volksabstimmungen*, or grassroots popular referenda. With activist Karl Fastabend, who two years later would later join Beuys for the duration of documenta V, the group moved to a permanent location, changed their name to the "Organization für direkte Demokratie durch Volksabstimmung" (ODD) ["Organization for Direct Democracy by Referendum"], and registered as an official not-for-profit. In line with West German leftist politics of the postwar period, the ODD held workshops and discussions on topics such as environmentalism, women's rights and anti-militarization.

On the invitation of documenta V curator Harald Szeemann, Beuys transferred the contents of the ODD directly into the exhibition space in Kassel, Germany. Desks, cabinets, boxes, blackboards and wall panels were moved from Beuys's Düsseldorf office into one room on the ground floor of the Fridericianum, alongside Beuys's new addition of a rose placed in a graduated chemistry beaker—a key motif in many of his multiples meant to signify the organic powers of creativity and thought. Represented as the Büro der Organization für direkte Demokratie durch Volksabstimmung (BODD) [Office of the Organization for Direct Democracy by Referendum], the BODD remained open for the full one hundred days of the exhibition, staffed daily by Beuys and Fastabend. Exhibition attendees were invited to step into the makeshift office and engage the BODD's occupants on any matter of politics and art. In Mesch's words, "Beuys institutionalized a public sphere within the museum, thereby reforming the museum into a site for broad public rational discourse on matters of social and political change."

In on-site interviews with critics and writers, Beuys outlined the political and aesthetic philosophies motivating not only the BODD, but the entirety of his artistic output and political activism as well (a lengthy interview with Clara Bodemann-Ritter remains the most extensive account and functions as my main reference here). Beuys saw no difference between the grassroots campaigning done in Düsseldorf and his artistic efforts in Kassel. Both endeavors spoke to Beuys's ultimate goal—to help the individual realize their creative potential in both aesthetic and political terms, with revolutionary results.

The *erweiterer Kunstbegriff* accounts not only for objects or modes of productions that demanded new aesthetic considerations, but signifies an expanded concept of the aesthetic itself.



Beuys's transfer of the ODD from its activist context to that of the art exhibition is not a change in terms within Beuys's scheme, but in fact posits the political and aesthetic spheres as identical. The creativity of the political is the 'politicalness' of creation. Beuys explains:

We will have to complete it little by little, to transform this material, namely what was one once called "Politics" for people, [to create a state] where everyone feels oneself to be part of society—where a creative person can contribute. So, in this way a future politics will become more like art. And that people learn that these concepts are eminently, let's say, human, artistic, so that it becomes interesting and exciting to engage with the material, namely with questions of the economy, with questions of law, with questions of educational policy, with questions of art, science, et cetera.

For Beuys the heterogeneous social enterprises of economy, law and education become artistic media as much as painting or sculpture. Each human (Beuys insists on that term) carries a latent ability to self-actualize that, when stimulated by art, can lead to the overall improvement of society.

In one of the last moments of the lengthy interview with Bodenmann-Ritter, Beuys summarizes his preceding statements:

I want to show that only art can create a future. But in any case, I've now naturally extended the concept of art. I am speaking of creativity and self-determination—of the possibility of determining oneself that lies within each person. Yet if you invoke self-determination, then you must grasp the medium, with which one may define oneself.

Political action must be oriented toward enabling the condition in which art can be instrumentalized and creativity supported. To this end, Beuys's work at the BODD in documenta V sought to launch a participatory dynamic of conversations and didactic visual materials that engaged Beuys's emancipatory creativity in a public sphere, an interactive, socialized instance of *erweiterer Kunstbegriff* which Beuys

would call *soziale Plastik* ["social sculpture."] By virtue of its sociality and open-endedness, the BODD sought to expand the agents of artistic creation itself, whether at work in traditional artistic media or political efforts, and in turn strive towards Beuys's famous adage, "Jeder Mensch ein Künstler" ["Every man is an artist."]

### III

Yet as the BODD continued during documenta V, a quasi-collaboration with the performance artist Thomas Peiter implicitly pressured the egalitarian and perhaps utopian connotations of Beuys's aesthetic philosophy. Costumed as Albrecht Dürer, Peiter had joined documenta V by interrupting the exhibition's press conference, to which Szeemann responded by giving Peiter the floor and immediately granting him an artist pass for the proceeding one hundred days of the exhibition. Following this, Peiter wandered through the halls of the exhibition space in character. As the artist himself wrote, on one occasion:

I appeared at [documenta V] as Dürer, and so I was gladly seen at Joseph's "Direct Democracy Room" [...] He would always shout "Dürer!"—until the day in 1972 when he said in front of an audience, "Dürer, I'll personally lead Baader-Meinhof through Documenta V, then they'll be resocialized!" This is as he wanted it and strongly believed. The public became uneasy. It ended up in chaos.

Peiter painted a signed version of Beuys's statement, "Dürer, ich führe persönlich Baader + Meinhof durch die Dokumenta V [*sic*], J. Beuys," on two "Demonstrationstafeln" ["protest signs"]: leading a large group of intrigued exhibition visitors, Peiter marched with his signs through the halls of the Fridericianum exhibition building and installed them in the BODD. With the aid of exhibition assistant Klaus Staack, Beuys then planted the signs in a pair of felt shoes offered by documenta for visitors and filled them with a margarine substance used throughout his work. As the fat dried, Beuys inserted rose stems from his chemistry beaker and leaned both signs against the room's walls, ultimately creating the sculpture "*Dürer, ich führe.*"

For Mesch, the piece illustrates Beuys's transformation of documenta's exhibition space into a social environment of "perma-



nent conference,” where the art institution hosts dynamic debate instead of purely aesthetic reflection between viewer and object. But yet, she argues, “*Dürer, ich führe*” also points to the “limited revolutionary potential of art: as the piece is installed, the fat-filled slippers stride directly into the wall.” Peiter’s protest banners become immobile, placed on the actual wall of the institution; political action hits a dead end. Similarly, for Svea Bräunert the piece “deliberately takes ironic aim at the ‘radical chic’ of the art world and its tendency to appropriate radical gestures.” . The static protest banners of “*Dürer, ich führe*” function as documentary relics of political action; yet, given Beuys’s faith in art as the supreme force of political change, “*Dürer, ich führe*” does not suggest the failed motivations of politicized art, contrary to Mesch and Bräunert.

Rather, Beuys’s iconography hints at a more involved attachment: the dried margarine recalls Beuys’s career-long interest in fat as a healing substance and the rose stands for the emancipatory creativity of humanity. The placards are planted into the exhibition’s felt shoes (felt being another thematic substance in Beuys’s work), illustrating, I would argue, the interconnectedness of artistic (Beuys’s ornamented shoes) and political (Peiter’s posters) participation. Viewed as a fixed sculptural assemblage and former object of protest, “*Dürer, ich führe*” takes on solemn or mournful qualities in light of Beuys’s reverent treatment of material and physical objects in his work. The slippers, healing fat, protest placards and rose petals together demonstrate Beuys’s conflation of the aesthetic and the political through the *erweiterer Kunstbegriff*, an iconographical deployment Charity Scribner likens to Beuys’s methodical resignification of trivial objects into meaningful “relics.”

In this sense, Peiter’s assemblage, as installed by Beuys, begins to assume funereal qualities, a testament not to the failure of art to engage with politics as Bräunert and Mesch suggest, but to the failure of *the RAF* to engage with politics in the correct manner, i.e. non-violently. In Beuys’s generally reformist political view, as with many Germans of the 1970s New Left, the RAF’s radicalism exceeded the boundary of allowable opposition in its bombings, kidnappings and murders, even if anti-im-

perialist and pro-communitarian sentiments remained the same. Curator Klaus Biesenbach describes this melancholy attachment and split from the RAF’s politics as “die Trauer um die verpasste einzigartige Chance, die durch den Terror der RAF vertan wurde: dass aus dem Deutschland der sechziger Jahre ein noch freierer und gesellschaftlich herausfordernder und anspruchsvollerer Staat als der heutige hätte entstehen können” [“The mourning for the unique and missed opportunity which was squandered by the RAF’s terrorism: that out of the Germany of the 1960s, an even freer, more socially challenging and demanding state could have emerged than the present one.”]

The message on the placards, “Dürer, ich führe persönlich Baader + Meinhof durch die Dokumenta V, J. Beuys,” suggests a reparative or compensatory ability of art to somehow offset the RAF’s unpalatable tactics, in line with Beuys’s positive view of creativity.





The RAF emerge as lapsarian subjects, whose extreme methods necessitate the beneficial healing of art. As Ellen Blumenstein writes, “Die beiden meistgesuchten Terroristen Deutschlands waren für [Beuys] Menschen denen es galt, Möglichkeiten zurück in die Gesellschaft aufzuzeigen.” [“Germany’s two most-wanted terrorists were, for Beuys, people whom necessitated the possibility of being shown back into society.”]

Yet as Peiter elucidates in his accounts, Beuys’s offer to show the RAF through documenta V was not entirely received by the public as a plaintive aesthetic gesture, but rather as tumultuous provocation. As Beuys’s former assistant Klaus Staeck notes, Peiter and Beuys’s actions drew not only on the fear that declared terrorists would actually come to documenta V, presumably with violent intentions, but that Beuys would act as sympathizer, equal and perhaps gallery docent:

Mentioning their names in this context had to be understood as utmost provocation and was correspondingly acknowledged with riots among the public. Through this direct pronouncement, visitors occasionally got the impression that Baader and Meinhof in fact wanted to visit documenta. In later years, one would have surely been suspected and prosecuted as an active terrorist sympathizer for this line.

This presumed affinity between Beuys and the RAF carries the potential to shock, insofar as the only morally acceptable attitude toward modern terrorism can be that of complete condemnation, as anthropologist Ghasan Hage has recently written. In his analysis of official West German state discourse in response to terrorism, historian Holger Nehring demonstrates how the political construction of the terrorist necessarily had to be anti-democratic; the terrorist was discursively constructed as a figure irrationally committed to the ending of democracy and the existence of the state, and thus social order itself. To be pro-terrorist figured to be anti-democratic—a binary logic of “with terrorists” and “against democracy” that froze categories of the beneficial state and the paradigmatically evil terrorist.

Yet what remains crucial in analyzing “*Dürer, ich führe*” is Peiter’s decision to remove the last clause of Beuys’s original statement: “dann sind sie resozialisiert.” For Mesch, Peiter’s edit is a provocative act of protest meant to associate Beuys with the RAF by insinuating a degree of solidarity or even collusion. Yet when read with the erased phrase, the affective tenor of Beuys’s statement on the placard transforms from affiliation to opposition, from a promise and invitation (“*Dürer, ich führe persönlich*



Baader-Meinhof durch die Dokumenta”) to an instrumentalized guarantee (“dann sind sie resozialisiert”). “Resocialization” here refers to the redemption of the RAF by virtue of what Mesch sees as “the realm of arts as an alternative sphere of activity for non-violent opposition and revolutionary resistance.” In this case, creativity is not merely transformative of a given society, as performed through the encounter between art and viewer, but additionally *its constitutive force*. If the RAF can be re-socialized, then society is one of art, then creativity is a defining attribute in society’s normative liberal subjects.

Art historian Peter-Klaus Schuster crucially connects Beuys’s aesthetic politics back to the figure of Albrecht Dürer himself. He writes, “Even for Dürer as a humanist, art [signified] that every human being has the possibility of making himself or herself what he or she will.” An engagement with the aesthetic signifies the self-fashioning appropriate to a politically engaged, productive subject. Yet in the normative extension of this sentiment, creativity becomes, in Schuster’s account, the *only* means by which the subject assumes a moral place in culture: “The creative powers extolled by Beuys as being revolutionary are thus also those which for Dürer, the humanist, made possible the Renaissance, the rebirth of any individual. Beuys’s slogan ‘Everyone an Artist’ was thus radicalised as early as Dürer to provide the insight that a person is *only a real human being if he or she is an artist*.” The utopian idealism of the statement, “Jeder Mensch [soll] ein Künstler [sein],” is replaced by the more descriptive, “Jeder Mensch ist ein Künstler,” where “jeder” may denote not just “every man” but “*any* man”: if x is a man, then x is an artist.

With this in mind, the resocialization of the RAF via art takes on the element of a social mandate, a possible normative imperative to shore up the system and remove deviancy in the name of art. If the social for Beuys is ideally constituted and enhanced by art, then Beuys’s statement “dann sind sie resozialisiert” not only reaffirms this sentiment but also indicates that there is something accordingly unsocial, and, tellingly, not properly artistic concerning the RAF. For Claudia Mesch, this was the group’s commitment to violent resistance as a means of anti-oppressive politics, instead of peaceful protest or similar actions.

Accordingly, the tension between Beuys’s interest in reforming and overcoming the current social order through creativity and his commitment to organizing the limits of art and the institution spoke to a key anxiety in the German left: how to change a conservative or oppressive political climate, and by what means? In terms of altering a political system, how far was too far? As Dorothea Hauser writes, “Es war gerade das Bewusstsein für den Zusammenhang zwischen der dynamischen Militanz der 68er und dem Gewaltfetischismus der RAF, das während der bleiernen Jahre zum Quell linker Identitätskrisen zwischen Solidarität und Selbsthass wurde.” [“It was exactly the awareness of the context between the dynamic militancy of the ‘68ers and the fetishization of violence of the RAF, which during the ‘years of lead’ became the source of the leftist identity crisis between solidarity and self-loathing.”] The RAF opened up a crisis of left radicality, in which the extension of resistance efforts, from protest to bombings, demanded moral condemnation, even if the general objectives were shared. The commotion in response to Peiter’s performance of carrying the “*Dürer, ich führe*” placards at documenta V attests that this political delineation could only be contained, at its most phobic, in drawing opposing lines between morally good and bad, the socialized and the unsocialized, the artist and the terrorist.

However, one key assumption remains in Beuys’s positioning of the RAF outside the domain of art, that which would redeem them as social subjects—that the aesthetics of art production and the aesthetics of terrorism were mutually incompatible. Yet, as I will now argue, this not only exposes a limit to Beuys’s concept of the *erweiterer Kunstbegriff* but also goes against an accepted critical assessment—that terrorism primarily functions *aesthetically*. Peiter’s adjustment of Beuys’s statement, in fact, suggests precisely such.

Moreover, we might turn to a suggestive sentiment by Peiter that resonates with the conception of the RAF in scholarly literature. At the opening for the *RAF-Ausstellung* in 2005, Peiter donned a cuckoo clock and a black sports jacket with the words “Meinhof” and “Dürer” scrawled in yellow paint—a gesture toward, if not quite a reenactment, of his 1972 piece. Explaining the cuckoo clock to the press, Peiter described it as a symbol for the various merchandise destroyed in Baader and Ensslin’s inaugural 1968 bombing of two Frankfurt department stores. He states, “Andreas Baader war ein Happening-Künstler. Er hätte das als Kunstaktion



ausgeben sollen!“ [“Andreas Baader was a Happening artist. He should have put that on a performance!”]

## IV

In the West German context, RAF terrorism seems to be comprised already along aesthetic and artistic lines. Despite the relatively minimal amount of violent damage done by the RAF (especially in comparison to contemporaneous left-wing terrorism in France and Italy), media attention on the group was enormous in a cultural holdover from the central role played by popular media during the 1968 student movement. Leander Scholz summarizes this phenomenon: “Aber es sind nicht die Texte der Roten Armee Fraktion, die überleben werden, sondern die Bilder [...]” [“But it is not the words of the Red Army Faction that will survive, but rather the images (...).”] We can think of key images—such as Ensslin and Baader at trial in Frankfurt, Hanns-Martin Schleyer captive in the RAF’s *Volksgefängnis* and Meinhof in Stammheim prison—that have become the primary means of the group’s representational and historical presence.

The RAF specifically operated in existing media infrastructures to disseminate and articulate the political; the aesthetic of terrorism becomes the image of terrorism—the sensory output that is codified into a durable cultural idiom. Terrorism does not function as a military assault meant to concretely destroy the entirety of a nation’s material substance (though there is an aesthetics to that as well), but rather intends to *convey* precisely such. As Peter Waldmann states: “Terrorismus sei ‘primär’ [als] eine Kommunikationsstrategie zu verstehen.” [“Terrorism should be understood ‘primarily’ as a communication strategy.”] Sara Hakemi adds:

It is irrelevant to the potency of a bomb threat whether in fact a bomb exists, only that the terroristic potential of language becomes realized—to classify this communicative core as abstraction or fictional violence however means misconstruing the essence of terror.

Accordingly, we might even consider the RAF as cultural producers and perhaps, following Foucault, author-functions. Charlotte Klonk describes the process by which

the RAF members, after the arrest of Baader, Meinhof and Ensslin, sent video recordings of Schleyer in captivity to newspapers and news stations, mostly censored by the West German government but shown internationally via French television outlets. Klonk credits the RAF, in fact, with inventing the conventional aesthetics of the terrorist hostage video: “Dazu gehören eine frontale, leicht aufsichtige, und statische Kameraposition, eine auffallend schlechte Bildqualität und das unregelmäßige Einzoomen auf ein verunsichertes Opfer.” [“This [aesthetic] involves a frontal, clearly lit, and static camera position, a strikingly poor image quality and irregular zooming-in on an anxious victim.”] In 1998, the former RAF member Astrid Proll even created *Hans und Grete: Bilder der RAF 1967-1977*, an edited photo anthology taken by the RAF of themselves and their travels, even including those taken illegally in Stammheim prison, published in a later edition in 2004.

Shooting photographs (nor people, perhaps) does not secure the RAF as artists in a generic sense, but Proll’s book functions as a cultural archive meant to inscribe the RAF’s creative endeavors in a supposed comparison to their acts of violence. Beuys’s references to the RAF and Dürer begin to take shape as an identificatory conceptualization of the RAF as fellow, if failed, artists, a point that Peiter strongly emphasizes in removing Beuys’s statement “dann sind sie resozialisiert.”

## V

In documenta V, Beuys and Peiter enact the fraught relationship between discursive modalities of aesthetics and terrorism, wherein the verbalized suggestions of the RAF’s arrival functioned as its own form of protest. The BODD illustrates the clashing of public and hidden transcripts, per James C. Scott’s formulation, where the perhaps heated—if certainly not violent—discussions of contemporary political issues find their anxious foil in Peiter’s static protest placards, a radicality threatening the civility of liberal discourse. Michael Taussig describes this general discursive condition as “the futile exercise in Liberal Aesthetics struggling to establish a golden mean and utterly unable to absorb the fact that terror always *talks back*.”

Here terror’s response is not a direct address from the RAF but the very mentioning of them, a summoning of their affective



cultural weight and associative historical presence. Peiter reinscribes the promise of artistic radicality in his modification of Beuys's attitude toward violent resistance, which Beuys plants on the exterior of his installation. As relayed to Bodenmann-Ritter, language for Beuys assumes the material properties of sculpture:

"Language is evidently for me in any case the first sort of sculpture [...] One shapes through language or through writing the further materialization of form more consciously."

The language of terror takes a form: for Peiter this is the protest sign, and for Beuys it is the sculptural assemblage-cum-relic establishing its presence in ritualistic mourning. "*Dürer, ich führe*" sets up circuits of resonance between an avant-gardist faith in the politically emancipatory properties of art and the moral limit of that faith's extension—violent terrorist resistance. The RAF motivate Beuys's compromised memorial, a memorial to the death of protest, the death of the *erweiterer Kunstbegriff*, the death of the RAF as social subjects.

In Western conceptions of the properly liberal subject, value is accrued to the artist-figure, a professional demarcation turned subjective latency for Beuys. The failure to meet that potential brackets those possible subject-positions who fall (morally, figuratively) outside the official contours of the polis: the violent, the criminal, the *uncreative*. Art here, even if expanded, secures official subjectivity, and carries strict political connotations outside the putative universality of its applications. The contradiction in Beuys's scheme between the terrorist and the artist might find an expression in the "*Dürer, ich führe*" itself, adorned with materials for Beuys that imply reparative notions of healing and creativity, while taking the form of a static relic of direct action. This melancholic condition only gains currency when the political normativity of the *erweiterer Kunstbegriff* becomes apparent, or rather when a deeply politicized conception of art and the aesthetic enters the playing field. As Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe write in relation to composer Karlheinz Stockhausen's praise of 9/11 as a perfect work of art:

Does it make any sense to speak as Stockhausen did, of the aesthetic character and effects of those violent-

ly transgressive acts? The events themselves, not their artful representation? To consider the merits of such an idea would require that we put aside the virtually unavoidable sentimentality that asks us to believe that art is always somehow humane and humanizing, that artists, however indecent they might be as human beings, become noble when they make art, which must inevitably ennoble those who experience it.

Yet it rings inaccurate to cast Beuys as a naïve leftist arts administrator of West Germany. His relationship to political radicality at documenta V remains ambiguous: in his interviews, he states interest in the reshaping and reforming of the political, most concretely through electoral reform, but rejects a notion of any sort of comprehensive oppression. In the documenta installation, Peiter's placards remain on the periphery of the BODD, a record of Peiter's political action put to rest, planted with the healing sustenance of fatty margarine and embellished by the organic positivity of creativity as represented by the rose. The traces of protest are precisely outside the normal functioning of a healthy democratic public sphere of open discussion and participation: where does direct action take place for Beuys? The artist seems to operate precisely in these impossibilities of the RAF's role in the domain of art, violence's accepted status and the melancholic malfunction of the RAF's tactics.

So what is the failure here? It is, at a glance, the failure of the RAF to enter in to a certain kind of liberal creative subjecthood favoured by Beuys, and it is also their historical failure to never have actualized their political vision in West Germany, a failure that reverberates with the legacy of the New Left and post-1968 radicalism-after-the-fact. Yet I think there is also a methodological failure to approach an aesthetics of violence untouchable within the confines of standard art production and reception. What this affectively palpable defeat exposes is the profound politics of art's taxonomies and the ideological baggage inherent in any conception of the term. So much as art is allowed miraculous peace-making in the *Monopol* project, historical revisions across political and temporal lines, so too does a normative convention of it turn protest and resistance, however extreme, into a mourned project unable to ramify in the present. "Failure" rings out in many directions, somewhere between repudiation, hope and struggle.



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## Joseph Henry

is currently a critic and sometimes curator living in Montreal. Originally from Los Angeles, Joseph received his BA from McGill University in art history and German studies. He's published in venues such as *Canadian Art*, *C Magazine*, *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, *esse*, *The New Inquiry*, *BLOUIN ART-INFO* and *The Believer Logger*, and was formerly the Assistant Editor of *BLOUIN ARTINFO* Canada. With Flora Dunster, he's launched a platform for experimental criticism titled *Grey On Grey*. In addition to independent gallery curation, Joseph's also worked at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art. This summer, he'll work at Artists Space in New York before beginning his PhD in art history at the CUNY Graduate Center.



I HAVE AN

AVERSION

TO YOUR

SUBVERSION





## MOVING IMAGES

Until I was detained in Cuba—sweating, trying to dissert my way out of custody like a criminal hackademic—I had assumed my work was closer to fiction than to felony.

Three years prior a Cuban friend lost his acting gig and we decided he might be able to sell my paintings to tourists in Old Havana. I sent him twenty and he sold them immediately by pretending they were his. We kept going, sending and selling paintings for years. Over time the images I made looked progressively less Cuban, and more like Canadian landscapes and family photographs. Carlos told me once that he compensated for the imagery by making *himself* look more Cuban. In 2010 he sold a painting of an iceberg to a woman from Holland:

*Mr. Weldon,*

*Recently I visited Havana, Cuba. [...] I have researched on the Internet and found your website. I'm very disappointed. The art is not Cuban.*

—Marion

*Dear Marion,*

*[...] While it may have lost its Cuba“ness” the work is either an artifact or a prop in an international art project. [...] Please acknowledge the picture as it is emptied of its original meaning. I assure you that the painting will be refilled over time.*

*Sincerely yours,*

*Aaron Weldon*

The letter prompted me to think more seriously about artifact and artifice in imitable situations. I eventually funded the piece through the Nova Scotia Department of Culture and Tourism—writing about the territory borders between illusion and disillusionment.

## Aaron Weldon

has contributed to exhibitions at the Confederation Centre Art Gallery; PEI (2014), The National Gallery of Canada; ON (2013), the Plug In ICA; MB (2013), and The Owens Art Gallery; NB (2013). Upcoming presentations include: ‘Faking the Avant-garde: Eccentricity in Art’ and ‘Nova Scotia: a Submerging Culture.’ Weldon is loosely based in Halifax, Nova Scotia.



“

*It's not as dangerous  
as it looks. All you have  
to do is ram the nozzle  
against the screen and  
press the trigger. ”*

---

Arthur C. Clarke  
*Childhood's End*, 1953



**fine arts**





